

The Work of Art

From Fetish to Forum

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Abstract

The modern idea of art has been in place for about two centuries. It has concurred with two other features of modernity: that of developed capitalist economy, and that of the new democratic public sphere. This article explores some of the relationships between art, capitalism and democracy. It argues that the notion of art heralded by modern aesthetic theories mainly hinges on the epistemic form of the commodity, highlighting the interaction between a producer, a product and a consumer. A different theorizing of the work of art could, however, depart not from the market place of commodities, but from the public forum for democratic deliberation. This alternative foundation of aesthetics is delineated on the basis of the anthropological idea of the ritual and its instantiation in contemporary theories of performativity, where the work of art is seen as an affordance for social encounters as well as for individual contemplation.

Keywords aesthetics, performativity, ritual, infrastructure, democracy.

Aesthetics

Studies of works of art are mostly divided, according to the twin meanings of the notion of “work” itself, between studying the arte-

facts produced by the artist, the works-as-things, and studying the ways in which artworks work, how they affect their recipients, or, in other words, the work-as-agency. In the aesthetic disciplines, we have a rich vocabulary about how works of art are made and about the techniques of composition that have gone into their making. And we have a somewhat less developed, but still quite far-reaching understanding of the aesthetics of their reception, how they affect their recipients, how they are encountered, appreciated and used in (historically significant) different ways, how they educate our senses and eventually how they sometimes enable us to look at the world differently by aligning our attention with the mode of experience they convey.

Likewise, we are well accustomed to consider the relation that exists between these two aspects of the work of art: between how it is made and how it impinges on our senses, between its form and its effects, or, in phenomenological parlance, between its noematic and noetic aspects. We know that an implied mode of reception is already built into the form of the aesthetic object, and inversely that the responsiveness to its formal features depends on the kind of intentionality with which the work is experienced. This loop between the work of art and its reception, between the work and its work, has eventually become a hermeneutic certainty in the contemporary understanding of artworks and of how art works. Arguably, this twofold take on the work of art is one of the particularities of the modern *regime* of art, what Jacques Rancière has baptized the “aesthetic” regime, in distinction to a classical, “poetic” understanding of art. The latter involved a discourse on art mainly targeting the objects of artistic representation and the rules pertaining to the proper confection of such representations – a poetics for proper images of proper objects. Under the aesthetic regime, in contrast, the interest in the represented object is attenuated, and the critical attention shifts from the relation that exists between motif and work to the one between work and beholder. Poetics is about making artful representations of dignified objects, whereas aesthetics is about making art objects that can be appreciated by its beholders. The poetic relation hinges on a mechanism of representation, whereas the aesthetic relation hinges on a mechanism of affect.

The canonical modern aesthetic theories are all invested with the double task of not only acknowledging the rules of art displayed in

artworks, but furthermore also understanding how they concur in the production of a specific aesthetic experience. This interdependence between the work as an object and the ways it works in the experience of individual subjects is a core piece in Kant's notion of the aesthetic reflective judgement, as well as in Schiller's idea of productive imagination and in Hegel's notion of aesthetic cognition. Since the romantic period, artworks have been theorized (and indeed identified) on the basis of their belonging and adherence to the field of art, i.e. not simply by way of the qualities of their confection, but by way of their *function* within the particular social sphere henceforth labelled as the aesthetic. In the modern regime of art, thus, as argued by Morten Kyndrup, art and aesthetics have become inseparably twinned notions where the nascent discourse of aesthetics was occupied by delineating and defining an area specific to art (as a collective singular, generic and medial differences notwithstanding), and where the arts on the other hand would now cater for this new field and provide it with actual instantiations, works of this thing called "art".

Throughout modernity, the work of art, in both senses indicated above, have fulfilled specific functions within the institutional machinery of the aesthetic "regime." Individual artworks and cultures of aesthetic experience have concurred in consolidating a sphere of art, differentiated from other societal spheres and gradually developing into a singular expert culture based on artistic craftsmanship, aesthetic connoisseurship, and a rich discourse on the specific forms of sensibility and cognition that pertain to the aesthetic. This art-system is a peculiar civilizational edifice, comparable to the systems of science, technology, and politics, and as such a token of the power of modernity's differentiation of rationalities, as described by Jürgen Habermas, or the disciplinary partition of the world, as described by Michel Foucault.

Commodities

When we consider art as a societal system, as an institutionally afforded framework for the production, distribution and consumption of works that work on their recipients in a specific way, one thing actually stands out as peculiarly characteristic for the entire set-up, namely that the blueprint of this system, all its whims and beauties included, is modelled on the dominant social form of its

era, that of the commodity. One thing is, of course, that when art became art in its modern sense, it did so by entering the market place of buyers and sellers with the artist in a new role as a producer, rather than being a supplier in the feudal economy of pre-modern art. The artwork, in its modern guise, is indeed a commodity in a specialized market. But moreover, and perhaps less of a truism, also our aesthetic categories interestingly comply with this logic, understanding the work of art as a peculiar product and the aesthetic relation, the work of this work, as a similarly peculiar mode of consumption; in other words, an encounter of a producer and a consumer facilitated by the market place. Again, it is perhaps not striking that art, in its modern aesthetic form, is modelled on the template of the commodity; the commodity is, after all, as Marx once had it, a “real abstraction” emerging from the way in which production is organised, and corollary how a mode of production organises our social being. Art comes to us packaged as a thing that can circulate in a market (or packaged in a way that attempts to defy this predicament), and we take interest in art as something we consume in delicate ways, including the exquisite mode of non-consuming baptized by Kant as a non-interested interest.

The question is not, then, whether a structural homology exists between the form of the commodity and that which we call “art”; neither is there any doubt that the commodity form has immensely afforded the development of art and the import of art in the modern age: complying with the commodity form has not been a prison house for art; rather, it has given it wings. Being confined to the formal mode of existence of the commodity has moreover been a condition that artworks have reflected in their being, using the very form to reach beyond it – showing this is one of the most important achievements of Theodor Adorno’s aesthetics.

One of the instances, however, where we might need to go back and reflect on the commodity form as a mostly unacknowledged template for our understanding of art, is precisely when it comes to our conceptualization of the agency of art. Agency of objects, when considered according to the logic of the commodity, inevitably seems to take the guise of the process that brings a product to the market place where its value is assessed, and from there on to the feast of its consumption, the trading of its exchange value for use value, whether satisfactory or not. According to this model, we are

constrained to consider art's agency as the experience the artwork provides for the recipient, its service to the consumer, as it were. Again, we have every reason to appreciate the rich array of aesthetic theories that originate from this model; it stands at the origin of our knowledge of how the artwork defies our understanding, reforms our outlook, incites our imagination, refreshes our senses, affects our bodies, and much more. But within this framework, understanding art's agency will invariably remain constricted to a small array of pre-determined formats modelled on the commodity form according to which a product impacts on us, touches us, transforms us as we engage in consuming it. The insights that stem from this analytical approach remain valid and indeed relevant, almost per default, as they concur in the mode of being of artworks throughout our modern age. But they should not, on the other hand, a priori obfuscate other qualities pertaining to the agency of artworks and artistic practices.

Rituals

One aesthetic approach that has actually attempted at breaking away from this itinerary of the commodity logic can be found in the recent upsurge in theories of the performative. Originally developed with reference to the theatrical event, theories of the performative aim to shift the focus from aesthetic consumption to aesthetic participation, and from the work of art as an object to the work of art as something that happens between bodies in a singular (and singularly staged) situation. The performative, in this view, doesn't take place as a "reception" of an artwork, but comes about as co-presence and co-creation, and consequently also leaves the traditional hermeneutics behind, not looking for a "meaning" or a "message" encoded in the artwork to be extricated by an effort of interpretive wit, but for the eventual advent of meaningfulness through the collective process of the performative event.

The agency of art, here, does not come about through the consumption of a work, in the encounter of a subject and an object, but through the organisation of social relations and the event of their singular instantiation. This performative approach, however, has quite naturally been restricted mostly to the "live" art forms where there is no clear-cut distinction between the artwork and its taking-place, theatre, music, and the protean genre of the performance that

has ramified explosively throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But it has also been available, as demonstrated by Erika Fischer-Lichte and Judith Butler, to describe and understand a range of cultural phenomena ranging from the European fascist mass mobilisations to contemporary moments of protest. There is, in other words, an aesthetics of the performative that differs structurally from the mainstream aesthetics developed within the art institution since its inception in the late eighteenth century by adhering less to the form of the commodity than to the form of the *ritual*.

This alternative aesthetics, based on the event and the being-together peculiar to the performative situation, has proved remarkably useful to gauge and understand a culture that has itself become increasingly real-time based in its expressions and interactive in its forms. And it has accompanied, moreover, a similar orientation in the arts, the continuous increase in artistic forms which crystallize into social events and intervene in the fabric of the social. The performative, by this way, has eventually become not just a hallmark for a specific kind of art that unfolds in time at specific places, but a dimension of art retaining interest throughout a broad variety of artistic creation, from gallery shows to poetry readings, from public art installations to interactive video, and so on. Thus, put differently, the performative is being thoroughly deployed and experimented in contemporary art, in what seems to be a common interest in an aesthetics mode that works differently from the inherited aesthetic paradigms and perhaps invites to unearth new, performative dimensions of literature, architecture, painting and other not natively performative art forms.

This new awareness of a different aesthetic dimension, signaled by the ubiquitous claim to a “performative turn,” appears also as an invitation to rethink the trajectory of the art-object beyond the commodity form from which it originated. To think of the agency of art no longer in terms of individual consumption (whether in guise of contemplation or arousal, interpretation or affective response) but in terms of how it becomes the medium for a different encounter and enters into the production of social situations. From an aesthetics of reception to an aesthetics of ritual.

We owe to Erika Fischer-Lichte to have demonstrated the fecundity of the anthropological notion of the ritual for purposes of understanding the new performative aesthetics. She particularly high-

lights Emile Durkheim's observations on the role of totemic rituals in his lectures on *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* from 1912. There are three salient features in Durkheim's analysis; first, that religious practices recorded by anthropologists in the nineteenth century seem to have a totem or fetish in common, an object representing a deity or an otherwise magical otherness; second, that a group identity is established on the basis of a shared worship articulated through ritual practices, transforming a multitude of individuals into a community; and thirdly that this process has a transformative power, lifting the participant from one state of being to another (the *passage* peculiar to the ritual). Durkheim's sociological interest in these processes puts less emphasis on the actual content of the totemic objects and ritualistic achievements; instead, he wanted to highlight the basic logic of community building inherent in these processes, acknowledging religious and other ritual and magical procedures as techniques for transforming individuals into socially cohesive groups, according to his *credo* that our understanding of societies should start out, not with individuals, but with a web of social relations through which the particular modes of existence of individuals come about.

The aesthetics of the performative, considered as an alternative to the aesthetic discourse of the modern art institution and the logic of the commodity on which it is moulded, thus points our enquiry in two directions. Firstly, it puts forward another source of aesthetic experience at work in our appreciation of art, which has been occluded in the mainstream discourse on art in modernity, shifting our understanding of the mode of attending to art from one of consumption of an object to one of partaking in a ritual. And secondly (consequently, to be sure), it introduces a different scope for the societal role and function of aesthetic experience, not merely an experience of being individually affected by the encounter with an artwork (or some aesthetic objects), but being collectively interpellated and eventually invoked as a part of a communal social organism by way of the ritualistic nature of gathering around this object of attention.

The seminal import of the aesthetics of the performative, then, is that it relocates the question of art's agency from the market place to the social public, from considering an object that impacts on a beholder to considering an object around which a set of social relations emerge, in turn leveraging the eventual coming into being of

something like a subjective stance. The “performative turn,” often enough announced as another paradigm shift in the humanities, surely designates a certain trend towards a shift of expressive strategy in contemporary art, as well as a new research direction in the study of culture; but it also, and perhaps more importantly, provides us with a hint of a new agenda for the understanding of the *function* of art in social life, a different archaeology of what art is for and why art is – namely a site of a community-building around objects and events.

Fora

Art in its modern form is not a totemic object, and the collective art encounter is not a magical or religious ritual. Neither should we expect art to maintain the same tasks that were assured by religious rituals in “primitive” societies described by nineteenth century anthropologists. We are not attempting to portray art as a secular version of religious faith or of magical thinking. But the *formal* characteristics of these practices none the less provide a useful model to describe some features of the societal mode of existence of the work of art.

The two-pronged formal logic of the ritual, according to which a group of individuals first agree on conferring a specific power on an object, and then secondly experience the formation of a social bond as they gather around this object, has recently been re-issued, no longer as a specifically religious phenomenon, but as a blueprint for the democratic assembly. Bruno Latour, in his essay “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik,” has suggested to describe the twofold process as the social instituting of what he calls a *matter of concern*. This formula, by way of an elegant swap of grammatical case, can be read in two interrelated ways: we can consider how the (fetishist) matter is being defined by the concern of those assembled, and we can consider how this piece of matter can (ritualistically) unite those assembled in a common concern. To Latour, the social logic of the “matter of concern” reveals a crucial feature of communal life. Living together demands that we identify the matters that concern us, and that we secondly agree to organise our lives according to whatever the respect for these matters of concern allows for. Living together as consensus about the stakes and constraints of our living conditions, and as acceptance to acknowledge the stakes and re-

spect the constraints. This would be something like an updated, contemporary version of the anthropologist's view of the advent of social order through the ritual. If Latour thus seems to take the anthropological model of the ritual to a more general level as a basic operational formula for democracy, I would like in return to exploit this general "post-ritualistic" model of matters of concern to better understand the agency of art beyond the commodity's trajectory from production to consumption.

Art's mode of being is social: it exists where it meets the world. This is a shared condition for any artistic expression – medium, genre and form notwithstanding. There is no art which is not in some way or other an address, a showing of something to somebody. This address has been framed by the commodity logic as an intimate encounter, the communion of lonely souls that have found each other in the market place, "hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère," as Baudelaire had it in his dedication to the reader of *Les Fleurs du Mal* in 1857. But in fact, the artwork doesn't have one addressee, it has many – any, really. And as I recognize myself as an addressee, I am similarly a part of a "we", a we consisting of singular individuals who have in common that we have accepted the address of an artwork. It might be customary to look at this "we" as a purely additive set of individuals who each make their unique experience of the work through their individual encounters. But if we refrain, again, from recurring to the default model of the commodity, we could instead claim that as addressees – as beholders, readers, listeners, users – we are from the outset parts of a community, sharing the role as addressees, sharing an attention towards the address. In this sense, a community is already somehow prefigured by the very existence of an artwork which is being exposed to a public. This public consists of a batch of people who have been more or less contingently brought together, and who are implicitly challenged to try and find out, *what* this community actually is about. Interacting with art is to participate in potential or actual communities. Understanding art as an address, then, can invite us to conceive of the addressee not only as the perennial individual consumer, but as a *forum* of individuals who share the response to the address.

A forum is the place of a gathering; historically, it has references both to the market place where people gather to exchange products

of their making, and to the democratic assemblage where common concerns are debated. In both cases, however, the properties of the place itself are of less importance than is what actually takes place there, the event of the gathering and the exchanges that are being made. Moreover, a forum is a place to seek out if you have a specific business to see to, it is a place of passage rather than of dwelling. These two qualities of the forum, its manifestation through the occurrence of an event, and the contingency of its attendance, also characterize the communities that emerge around artworks. The claim, then, as an alternative and a supplement to the description of the aesthetic relation between the artwork and the beholder, is that a forum comes into being each time an artwork articulates an experience to a public and somebody accepts this invitation, thus sharing an effort to take in this experience. We might not eventually accept the offer, and we might not develop that which we have shared in common. But even if we don't, we will nonetheless experience how the work in question inaugurates a forum where I have a concern in common with others in the same situation, whether it is an encounter in real time, like a concert or a theatre representation, an interaction in a specific space, like an exhibition show or a public intervention, or indeed a distributed experience shared between those of us who have read the same book, seen the same movie, contemplated an identical object.

The agency of art here discloses features that do not transpire when we focus only on the customary itinerary from artist to beholder, from producer to consumer. Widening the focus, we will see that the very presentation of a work of art inaugurates a forum composed by those who share the experience of considering themselves as addressees of what is presented, and that the set of their individual relations to the artwork also instantiates a set of relations *between them*. They are related by way of being responsive to the same address, by letting themselves be affected, and by being in a situation where they can potentially engage in a negotiation of the import of this affect. The peculiar nature of the forum of the artwork thus hinges on the fact that the relation between its participants is reinforced by a bi-directional interaction: they are put into a relation to each other by gathering around the work of art (again, figuratively speaking, ranging from attending a live event together to ordering a book on Amazon...), and they are put into relation to

each other by letting themselves be affected by the work, sharing this way of being exposed.

The fora of art distinguish themselves from other gatherings and assemblies of people with common interests precisely by way of this bi-directional mechanism. When gathering in a common cause or with a common interest, the nature of the community is already given in advance by the nature of the concern as something that should be pursued in common. Here, the relation to the concern is uni-directional, that which we share and which in turn binds us together. In the case of the artwork, in contrast, the content of the concern remains in suspense; we might gather due to a shared interest in “art”, but we don’t know what will result from making ourselves susceptible to the address to which we are exposing us. Or put differently: we contend to being affected, but we don’t know how the affect will – precisely – affect us. And this is when the anthropological model of the ritual comes to its full deployment as we give it over to the object of concern around which we gather to define, on its part, the nature of the community thus established.

If the forum of art is different from other communities, it comes back to the indeterminacy of the promise that makes us attend to art in the first place. We gather around art because we expect to be affected – pleased, entertained, shocked, enlightened – because we expect to be moved, in a sentimental as well as in an epistemological sense. What we take from art is produced by way of an experience, that is, we do not only contemplate an object, but also contemplate the repercussion of this object in our own sensorium. It is a major point in modern aesthetics that runs from Kant’s *Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck* to Adorno’s *begrifflose Erkenntnis* that art produces an experience through which we submit to being subjected to a transformation whose terms we are only partly in control of. The nature of this experience, however, presents itself differently at the two levels of analysis: that of the individual, intimate encounter, and that of an address to a potential forum. On the first level, we have a set of descriptions taking their departure in a phenomenology of consciousness to elucidate the processing of aesthetic experience. On the second level, the question of experience – that is, how to recognize that which is presented to you – becomes a collective one as well. If something happens to you on the individual level of aesthetic experience, the public address to a forum additionally

launches a question of how that which happens to you can become a common concern. Who are we, this assemblage of individuals who are being affected by the work of art? How do we recognize ourselves in that which is presented to us?

A forum of art thus distinguishes itself from gatherings based on common interests in that it is not identitarian, convoking militants of established positions. The forum works the other way around, not assembling people on the basis of who they are, but assembling people around a *question* of who they are. Or put differently, not a set based on some contingent genre, but a contingent set in search of a that common genre that would result from being addressed by a work of art.

Democracy

In the modern *regime* of art, the contours of a specific aesthetic relation between the work of art and its beholder emerge in homology with the commodity form that is becoming the matrix for art when it is no longer produced on request, but for the market. And by the same token, art is no longer deposited to and framed by representative publics such as the church or the royal and mercantile powers that be, bequeathed to adorn their sovereignty. When art enters into the market place, it also enters into a new public sphere where it addresses not only its potential customers, but also the contingent fora that make out its publics. The thrust of art under the auspices of its modern regime has two wings, that of the market place, and that of the public sphere. Our notion of the agency of art, however, comes out very differently depending on which of the two contexts we emphasize. In the first context, which seems to be the one that has most powerfully fueled our modern aesthetic categories, we study the consumption of the fetishized commodity and the drama of individual human consciousness it entails, whereas in the other, we get a glimpse of a peculiar democratic function of art by way of the fora it concatenates in the emerging public sphere. Moreover, and this is perhaps a point that has not been theorized sufficiently, these two tenets interlock in a specific way. It is thus not enough to affirm that artworks are objects to aesthetic experience and that they create new publics of interested citizens, respectively. What is important is that they confer the reflective judgement pertaining to the aesthetic relation on the social fora they convoke.

This mechanism of collective interpellation enacted by the work of art evokes another feature which was highlighted by Durkheim in his sociology of religion, the collective production of self-fashioning ideas: "A society is not constituted simply by the mass of individuals who comprise it, the ground they occupy, the things they use, or the movements they make, but above all the idea it has of itself." (Durkheim, 425) In addition to the function of the ritual that it produces a basic sense of communality where members of a society can "reaffirm in common their sentiments" (429), it importantly does so by presenting society with *images of itself*, providing representations suggesting "[how] individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it." (227) This is the (indeed secular) function of the forum of art: that it frames the way artworks affect us in guise of a question of how we can recognize ourselves as a society, once we delve into the self-fashioning prompted by the aesthetic experience.

In parallel to the way in which art works on the level of the individual aesthetic experience, its "aesthetic agency," it also works on the level of the forum of art, submitting the affect of the art encounter to a collective negotiation of a social self-image, thus what we could call its "democratic agency." As magisterially formulated by Rousseau, democracy delicately requires the individual to give itself over to the community which, on the other hand, only exists by way of this transferral of sovereignty; the individual subject needs to abdicate in order only to re-emerge at itself, as a social subject (see Rebentisch, 308-11). Democracy implies this chiasmic metabolism between the individual and the community, the individual disappearing into the community which in turn empowers the individual to become what it is. Along the same lines, Jacques Rancière poignantly remarks that "politics cannot be defined on the basis of any pre-existing subject," and that democracy, thus, "is not a relationship between subjects, but one between two contradictory terms through which a subject is defined." (Rancière 2010, 36)

It is indeed questionable whether such an idea of democracy is thriving in the contemporary context of spectacular politics, aggressive identity politics and ramifying "echo-chamber"-communities. Interestingly, though, the fora of art actually retain some qualities of this genuinely democratic structure by offering the means of a collective self-fashioning based on the shared experience of an altered

perception of oneself. "There is no doubt," Durkheim quips, "that society sometimes hesitates over the manner in which it must conceive itself." (425) Aesthetic experience provides this hesitation with an expression, an affect that needs to be accommodated, which is in turn given over to a forum and its potential musings on the qualities of the "we" it entails. The work of art challenges our everyday social self-perception; however much of a truism, this remains a prime feature of art under the aesthetic regime. But in addition, we need to recognize that the forum of art invites a collective self-determination on the basis of being subjected to this challenge. The forum is a social infrastructure in which art is being put to work. And this work is political, not in the sense of advocacy or militating, or not necessarily so, but in the sense of affording an exercise in democratic deliberation and social self-fashioning. To develop this understanding of the agency of art, the work of art as an indispensable infrastructure for maintaining a democratic public sphere, is an urgent matter for a contemporary aesthetics.

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